

Arnold Böcklin, *The Isle of the Dead* (1883)

Abstract

The work of Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901) became enormously popular in Germany, and by the late 1890s German critics named him the “most *German* painter of the century.” His paintings appealed to the educated middle classes [*Bildungsbürgertum*] but also to a broader public: while Böcklin drew on classical themes for his painting, he sought to move beyond neoclassicism by infusing themes of antiquity with a new emotional appeal.

By far his most famous painting is *Die Toteninsel* [The Isle of the Dead], painted in five different versions. The third version, currently in the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin, became the most well-known, as it was so widely reproduced. The painting depicts a desolate and rocky island, towards which an oarsman steers a boat, in the front of which a shrouded figure in white stands before a coffin. The tiny island is covered with cypress trees and rocky cliffs, into which are carved several sepulchral portals.

In 1890, Max Klinger created a black-and-white etching based upon Böcklin's painting, and reproductions of Böcklin's and of Klinger's versions both circulated widely. It was said that a reproduction of *The Isle of the Dead* hung in every bourgeois living room. Sigmund Freud kept a reproduction in his office; Vladimir Lenin hung a version above his bed; and it was a favorite painting of Adolf Hitler. Part of Böcklin's appeal around 1900 was the way that he could be seen to represent *both* “the modern” *and* “the German” in art.

Source



Source: Arnold Böcklin, *Die Toteninsel*, oil on wood panel, 1883. Alter Nationalgalerie, Berlin.
<https://id.smb.museum/object/967648/die-toteninsel>

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie / Andres Kilger

Recommended Citation: Arnold Böcklin, *The Isle of the Dead* (1883), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:image-5375>> [September 26, 2025].